

The Military-Media Connection: For Better or For Worse

Colonel Barry E. Willey, US Army

THE EVOLUTION of the strange and often strained relationship between the US military and news media reached a climax in 1983 following the assault on the Caribbean island of Grenada, when the media were excluded from the planning and execution of that mission for the first 48 hours. The subsequent *Sidle Commission* findings and recommendations set in motion a decade and a half of experimentation with solutions to the problem of the natural antagonism between these key elements of our democracy. But the intense soul searching that resulted was part of the problem. We worked so hard to get the military and media cultures to be like each other that we overlooked the fact that they are “natural enemies” and that will never change. It is time to stop trying to resolve the perceived problem of military-media antagonism and recognize that this relationship is natural. Learning to nurture that mutual enmity—building on similarities and mutual interests and recognizing differences—can create a trust and confidence between the two that results in fairer media coverage of the military and greater access by the media.

A Brief Description of the Professions

The journalism *profession*—some would question that description because journalists, in the main, have no written ethical code or mandated list of qualifications for members—is composed of reporters, editors and business managers who have two missions: objective news reporting and profit making. Print media are under tremendous pressure today to compete with the burgeoning visual markets of television and the Internet. Those visually oriented media are under pressure to be the least expensive and highest quality within their own competitive markets. Deadlines still drive reporters to “crash and burn” to get the facts, write the story and land the “page one, above-the-fold byline.” Jour-

The sole purpose of the military is to fight and win the nation's wars. All other missions are secondary to that. In order to accomplish that mission, secrecy in the planning and execution of military operations is ingrained in the mind-set of the military culture. To violate that premise is to violate the very sanctity of life, because it is the lives of America's treasure—its sons and daughters—that are at stake.

nalists of any ilk might bristle at this blunt characterization of their business, but most would have to agree with the description. It does not fit all media, but it does fit much of what we know today as the profession of journalism.

It is equally hard to lump the entire US military into one generalized mold, but a brief description for the purposes of comparison is needed. Military professionals are trained from the start that the sole purpose of the military is to fight and win the nation's wars. All other missions are secondary to that. In order to accomplish that mission, secrecy in the planning and execution of military operations is ingrained in the mind-set of the military culture. To violate that premise is to violate the very sanctity of life, because it is the lives of America's treasure—its sons and daughters—that are at stake. With those descriptions in mind, a look at where our two cultures have been is in order.

Historical Overview

Few in the US military today remember or appreciate the unique relationship that existed between combat soldiers and reporters such as Ernie Pyle or Walter Cronkite, whose daring deeds in World War II are legend. These reporters created an endearing, and enduring, legacy that has not been dupli-

cated. They had access to the highest levels of command and had the complete trust of commanders and soldiers alike. Press "censorship" was a concept that reporters of that era understood and accepted. The Korean conflict, our "nondeclared war," became a transition period when reporters still had fairly good access to combat troops, with some limited censorship as the conflict progressed. But the political stakes were high because of the Cold-War overtones and China's involvement. The military's concern for media criticism of UN commanders' decisions also resulted in a form of censorship during that conflict.¹ Perhaps the seeds of mistrust of the media by the military were planted then, considering the extensive coverage of President Harry S. Truman's controversial firing of General Douglas MacArthur, an undisputed hero of World Wars I and II.

Vietnam

If Korea was the transition, then Vietnam was the turning point. Never before had Americans viewed the death and destruction of combat, on a daily basis, from their living rooms. Television news had come into its own. The "Five O'Clock Follies" created a serious distrust of military and government officials by most reporters covering that conflict and a skepticism that was contagious. Reporters did not lose the Vietnam War for America, as is often alleged, but their aggressive and candid reporting did inform a callous public about the futility of the war's strategy—a strategy that ignored the need for public support and that cost 58,000 American lives.

Since then, the military's relationship with the media has undergone an evolutionary transformation, punctuated by a variety of operational deployments that have both refined and confused the way military forces deal with journalists. One key document in this evolutionary process is the Department of Defense's (DOD's) *Principles of Information*, which sets forth pertinent guidelines. These guidelines were formalized following Operation *Desert Storm* but began to evolve after the Grenada operation, which also spawned the national media pool concept. The underlying thread of the guidelines stresses the need for timely and accurate information about military operations, made available to the public, Congress and the media, consistent with security and statutory requirements.

Operation *Earnest Will*

The new national media pool was established to provide an on-call group of "heavy-hitter" media representatives from Washington, D.C., access to

breaking news events involving military forces. It marked the first significant attempt at closer cooperation with the media since Grenada. The first real test came in July 1987 during the first transit of the

The "Five O'Clock Follies" created a serious distrust of military and government officials by most reporters covering that conflict and a skepticism that was contagious. Reporters did not lose the Vietnam War for America, as is often alleged, but their aggressive and candid reporting did inform a callous public about the futility of the war's strategy.

"reflagged" Kuwaiti oil tankers, escorted by US Navy ships, in Operation *Earnest Will*. What should have been a routine transit of the Persian Gulf by the *Bridgeton* supertanker and its several US Navy escorts turned into an exciting "coup" for the accompanying media pool aboard the cruiser USS *Fox*. When, during the course of the transit, the *Bridgeton* hit a floating mine and began to list, the naval escorts fell in line behind the tanker as it continued toward Kuwait.

The embarrassing truth, clear to the reporters on board, was that the tanker could absorb a mine hit and continue without much trouble. However, if one of the escort ships were to hit a mine, it probably would quickly sink. The tables were turned, therefore, and the escorted vehicle became the escort to the more fragile Navy ships.

Through the episode, public affairs officers (PAOs) accompanying the media pool worked hard to overcome some of the old biases and misgivings shared by commanders and their crews in order to give the media access and information. The natural tensions between the two cultures, amid the cramped spaces of a naval combatant and the breaking news that was hard to ignore or deny, actually worked to the advantage of all. Now, with the military and media forced to cooperate, reporters gained a useful appreciation of the challenges of carrying out national policy under uncertain and unorthodox circumstances. The military, while often frustrated with the media, learned firsthand of new technologies' impact on reporting and the effect of that reporting on national strategy. Perhaps that first operational deployment of the national media pool symbolized a new era in efforts by both cultures to meet each other halfway in their journey toward cohabitation in a complex and challenging world.

The natural tension between the military and media cultures during the Haiti operation helped ensure that the media got what they needed and that the military forces were given due credit for the hard work they were doing to restore order and create a secure environment for the new government. Once again, both cultures had ample time to learn from and about each other. Both sides, for the most part, took advantage of that time.

That incident began a year-long effort to provide national media members periodic coverage of those Gulf transits, culminating in the largest naval engagement since the Vietnam War. In April 1988, US Navy combatants engaged and sank or destroyed a number of Iranian combatants during Operation *Praying Mantis*. The Gulf media pool was aboard a vessel in the Indian Ocean, just outside the Strait of Hormuz, when the orders to attack the Iranian vessels were received. The accompanying PAOs quickly moved the reporters to the command vessel for the surface action group in charge of the mission and they were able to see this historic action unfold. Again, the natural tension between the military and the media was present throughout that incident and served to challenge each community to learn as much as possible about the other's business. As a result of this "year in the Gulf," military-media relations were as good as they had ever been to that point in history, perhaps even surpassing those during World War II.²

Operations Just Cause and Desert Shield/Desert Storm

In 1989, the media community expected more cooperation from the military than they received during the Panama invasion. The national media pool was alerted, but deployed too late, and upon arrival in Panama, was sequestered in a briefing room and missed the invasion. Secrecy during that operation was a prime concern of military planners, just as it had been for Grenada six years earlier. However, insufficient planning to accommodate journalists on this mission—along with some bad luck and good intentions gone wrong—set back the progress made in the preceding years.

The next major deployment, *Desert Shield/Desert Storm* in 1990 and 1991, provided its own set of challenges, not the least of which was the guarded view of the media by the host nation, Saudi Arabia.

Eventually media were accommodated during the long seven-month deployment, and many were even "embedded" into units before and during the ground operations. Still, many journalists complained afterward that they were not given sufficient freedom to cover all aspects of the conflict. Some senior commanders realized only afterward that their inattention to accommodating media resulted in virtually no public visibility for their units' achievements. Conversely, some commanders with the foresight to allow media to join their units beforehand and to ride along during the ground war, received magazine cover stories detailing their exploits.

The US Marine Corps handled media with typical care and close attention, and the resulting positive coverage validated its efforts. Several journalists, despite the complaints, fared well from this event, writing best-selling books about their adventures or misadventures. The bottom line, however, from this whole episode is that the natural enmity between military and media kept the military on its toes, while forcing the media, after seven grueling months in the desert, to better appreciate the trials and concerns of troops. Most military commanders would have to agree that the media coverage of *Desert Shield/Desert Storm* was balanced and generally favorable where cooperation, patience and tolerance were evident.

Education and Mutual Understanding

The key to success in this relationship is understanding the other side and being willing to endure a few frustrations and setbacks along the way. Equally important is the realization that the natural tensions between media and military will always exist. The best approach is to educate each side, as much as possible, on the peculiarities of the other's culture. Appreciation for the challenges each must face can go a long way toward easing the tensions but will never eliminate them. Nor should they be eliminated. The journalism profession, as the "watchdog" of our Constitution and "fourth estate" of government, must maintain a healthy skepticism in its coverage of our military. And the military must exercise sufficient security precautions in performing its duties to ensure our troops go in harm's way, when they must, with every possible advantage over our enemies.

Haiti

Since the Gulf War, our military has experienced perhaps the highest operations tempo of any time

A Navy public affairs officer discusses operations with a pool reporter during the transit of reflagged tankers from the Strait of Hormuz to Kuwait, July 1987.

US Navy

Public affairs officers accompanying the media pool worked hard to overcome some of the old biases and misgivings shared by commanders and their crews in order to give the media access and information. . . . The military, while often frustrated with the media, learned firsthand of new technologies' impact on reporting and the effect of that reporting on national strategy.

in our nation's history. Deployments to Haiti and Bosnia have kept the military-media tension alive. In September 1994, the US military saw firsthand the oft-predicted scenario that media "will be there on the ground" waiting for our troops' arrival. As the military mission was changed literally at the 11th hour from a "forcible entry" to a "permissive" operation, and members of the XVIII Airborne Corps streamed ashore to help restore a democratic government, hundreds of international journalists swarmed the streets of Port-au-Prince and other cities and towns of the tiny island nation. They were there, with their laptops, satellite dishes and cell phones, reporting events as we came ashore. They challenged the spokesman for joint task force (JTF) 180 at the twice-daily press conference with questions about incidents that had just occurred in the streets, but had not yet been reported to the operations staff, let alone the PA staff. The pressure they put on the spokesman was frustrating but, in turn, forced PA personnel to work even harder to establish effective lines

of communication with units, operations staff and higher headquarters.

Open Access to Media

The Joint Information Bureau (JIB) in Haiti registered 1,300 journalists during the first two months of the operation. Nearly all the journalists requested access to units, commanders and subject-matter experts (SMEs) in order to enhance their reporting with comments from participants. From the beginning of the operation, the primary ground rule established by the JIB, directed by the Department of Defense and US Atlantic Command PAO, was freedom of movement for media and open access to all units and operations, while, in turn, addressing the legitimate security concerns of the units involved. Military escorts were not required or desired for the media, nor were there enough to go around had they been required. The expanded media access, combined with the daily briefings and use of SMEs, created an atmosphere of trust between the reporters, military units and PA personnel, and coverage



An 83d Infantry Division soldier stops to reload his Garand during fighting near Houffalize, Belgium, 15 January 1945.

“Not since Vietnam has America faced a serious war, involving a serious level of death [and Vietnam’s 58,000 American coffins were a fraction of the butchers’ bills paid in the great wars], and that conflict ended a quarter of a century ago. We are a nation in which there are fewer and fewer people, and they are older and older people, who accept what every 12-year-old in Bihac knows: there are things worth dying for, and killing for.”

gradually changed its tone. Many media skeptics reporting from afar on blurry policy issues often became “believers” embedded with Special Forces A Teams patrolling the Haitian hinterlands or with 10th Mountain Division (Light) military police cruising the dangerous streets of Port-au-Prince or Cap Haitien.

As could be expected, there were always cases of frustrated journalists who could not always get what they felt they needed, when they needed it. Others thought that the JIB was withholding information or covering up problems. There were plenty of commanders and soldiers who did not like all that was being written about those very confusing first few days of the operation. As an example, a *New York Times*’ editorial, the day after the first press briefing, accused the JTF 180 spokesman of giving a “bland” briefing and dodging legitimate questions from the media—somewhat of an unfair poke, considering the comment came after only one briefing and during the height of confusion that reigned throughout Port-au-Prince the first few days. Two months later, however, following the successful and rather uneventful return to power of President Jean

Bertrand Aristide, many of the major newspapers were positively proclaiming that the military’s effort was “so far, so good,” and singing the praises of the troops and their commanders.

The natural tension between the military and media cultures during the Haiti operation helped ensure that the media got what they needed and that the military forces were given due credit for the hard work they were doing to restore order and create a secure environment for the new government. Once again, both cultures had ample time to learn from and about each other. Both sides, for the most part, took advantage of that time.

Haiti was a classic information warfare “battlefield,” and PA practitioners accomplished their mission as measured against DOD Directive S-3600.1, *Information Operations*: “Public Affairs during Information Operations must not focus on directing or manipulating public actions or opinions but rather seek a timely flow of information to both external and internal audiences.”

Bosnia

Media coverage of Bosnia has replicated the Haiti model, to a large extent, in that hundreds of jour-

Network news crews in Saudi Arabia, 23 August 1990.



US Army

The key to success in this relationship is understanding the other side and being willing to endure a few frustrations and setbacks along the way. Equally important is the realization that the natural tensions between media and military will always exist. The best approach is to educate each side, as much as possible, on the peculiarities of the other's culture.

Some senior commanders [during Desert Shield/Desert Storm] realized only afterward that their inattention to accommodating media resulted in virtually no public visibility for their units' achievements.

nalists have traveled to and roamed around the Balkan countryside to cover all aspects of that complex scenario. Access to most countries involved has been open, and all sides of the conflict are generally eager to share their views. Coverage of military operations has been continuous, consistent and, from most appearances, fair throughout the deployment since it began in December 1995.

A Combined Public Information Center in Sarajevo and a US JIB in Tuzla (the US sector) have facilitated the visits from scores of reporters seeking the right words and pictures to tell the conflict's story for a doubting, skeptical and largely disinterested world. Unfortunately, despite the relative success of the combined US and NATO allies' military efforts, most of the US media—except for major publications following the policy issues related to Bosnia in Washington—seem to have shrugged off the Balkans as a distant sideshow, giving it short shrift, and then only when a significant event such as elections, rioting or loss of life occurs.

Reporters often have every good intention of revisiting a particular story from Bosnia, but their editors override the reporter because it has been done once and no one is really interested. Nevertheless, the current level of cooperation in Bosnia is perhaps another high-water mark in the history of military-media relations. Both sides are working hard—the military, to keep its sacrifices visible to the international community, and the media, to unravel and explain the often-perplexing situation in Bosnia. Each now better understands the challenges and frustrations of the other.

The remarks of journalist Michael Kelly, a senior writer at *National Journal*, published in an "op-ed" piece in *The Washington Post* on 19 November 1997, are insightful, reflecting a newfound appreciation for the military's point of view. His comments relate his experiences in both *Desert Storm* and Bosnia: "It seems obvious to me now [in Bosnia] that what seemed obvious to me then [in Desert Storm] was the usual result of a little

knowledge intruding suddenly on total ignorance. I had never seen the results of war, and the results horrified me out of my wits. In this, I was of course typical of my generation of reporters. The result is, in matters military, a press corps that is forever suf-

They were [in Haiti], with their laptops, satellite dishes and cell phones, reporting events as we came ashore. They challenged the spokesman for joint task force (JTF) 180 at the twice-daily press conference with questions about incidents that had just occurred in the streets, but had not yet been reported to the operations staff, let alone the PA staff.

fering a collective case of the vapors. At the least exposure to the most unremarkable facts of military life—soldiers can be brutes and pigs, generals can be stupid, bullets can be fatal—we are forever shocked, forever reaching for the *sal volatile*. Fortunately, not many people pay much attention to us anymore. But the media's generational horror at war's truths reflects the larger society's views, and this larger society includes the military itself. Not since Vietnam has America faced a serious war, involving a serious level of death (and Vietnam's 58,000 American coffins were a fraction of the butchers' bills paid in the great wars), and that conflict ended a quarter of a century ago. We are a nation in which there are fewer and fewer people, and they are older and older people, who accept what every 12-year-old in Bihac knows: there are things worth dying for, and killing for."

The military—commanders, troops and PAOs alike—would do well to reevaluate their own views about the journalism profession, especially as we approach the 21st century, and realize the awesome implications of the information age, already upon us. An observation by Dr. Lawrence Yates of the US Army Command and General Staff College is worth considering: "Like it or not, the news media

have more impact than most other agencies on how an operation is perceived by the outside world. In light of that power, a more productive approach than open hostility toward the media on the scene is to recognize why they are there and what they want, to disseminate as much information as possible, to be as forthright as possible (that is, do not give the impression of lying or hushing up embarrassing information), to allow reporters access to places and troops without grossly violating operations security and, in general, appear accommodating while recognizing that the interests of the military and those of the media do not have to coincide.³ Former US Defense Secretary Melvin R. Laird also has a succinct description of the media, based on his experience with them from 1969 to 1973, and how to best view them: "I don't think the press is a problem. They are adversaries and should be adversaries. That's their role. But you don't want to turn them into antagonists. You want to keep them as adversaries. That's what they should be."⁴

The military and the media are, ultimately, a marriage that displays the tensions, friction and confrontation that often comes with a marriage, but it is a natural tension that is meant to be. And it is one that will survive, indeed must survive, and even thrive in the next century. It is time to stop fretting about this unseemly relationship and get on with a vigorous program of education for both camps. Press pools will come and go, and the issue of including media in the "first wave" of future operations will continue to be debated. One thing is certain, however. The volatile, uncertain, complex and ambiguous nature of the 21st century promises two guarantees—troops will continue to be deployed "in harm's way," and the military and the media will continue to walk hand-in-hand, in blissful, bitter-sweet communion. It's only natural. **MR**

NOTES

1. Frank Aukofer and William P. Lawrence, *America's Team: The Odd Couple, A Report on the Relationship Between the Media and the Military*, Freedom Forum First Amendment Center at Vanderbilt University, 1995, 39.

2. For further discussion of this period of time, see MAJ Barry E. Willey, "Military-Media Relations Come of Age," *Parameters* (March 1989).

3. Lawrence A. Yates, "Military Stability and Support Operations: Analogies, Patterns and Recurring Themes," *Military Review* (Jul-Aug 97), 57.

4. Aukofer and Lawrence, 68.

Colonel Barry E. Willey is the public affairs officer for the United States Special Operations Command, MacDill Air Force Base, Florida. He received a B.A. from the US Military Academy and an M.A. from Indiana University. He is a graduate of the Command and General Staff College and the Army War College. He has served in a variety of command and staff positions in the Continental United States, Panama and Europe, to include: public affairs officer, 82d Airborne Division, Fort Bragg, North Carolina; operations and training officer, 2d Battalion, 508th Infantry Regiment, Fort Bragg; chief of media, US Central Command, MacDill Air Force Base; executive officer, 2d Brigade, 24th Infantry Division (Mechanized), Fort Stewart, Georgia; Army senior leader public affairs adviser, the Pentagon; and special assistant for public information to the Supreme Allied Commander, Europe. While assigned to the Pentagon, he was deployed to Haiti (Operation Uphold Democracy) as director of the Joint Information Bureau and spokesman for Joint Task Force 180.